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To cite this article: Moreno Mancosu & Gaetano Scaduto (04 Jun 2024): Crowds and Smiles: Visual Opportunity Structures and the Communication of European Political Leaders During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Mass Communication and Society*, DOI: [10.1080/15205436.2024.2351980](https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2024.2351980)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2024.2351980>



Published online: 04 Jun 2024.



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Crowds and Smiles: Visual Opportunity Structures and the Communication of European Political Leaders During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The growing interest in political leaders' visual communication often emphasizes specific visual features without focusing on the driving factors behind these strategies. Our study introduces the Visual Opportunity Structure (VOS) theory, aiming to explain the use of specific visual elements based on their suitability within the socio-political context. We examined the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing a large dataset ($N=73,379$) of Instagram posts by 28 European national party leaders coded through automatic facial and emotional recognition algorithms. The findings reveal a negative link between the use of inappropriate visual features during pandemic waves, like depicting happiness and groups of people, and the severity of the pandemic's impact. Political leaders significantly reduce these inappropriate visuals during severe waves, reintroducing them in calmer periods. This trend is particularly pronounced among government party leaders. Our research not only unveils a pattern in the visual communication tactics used by political figures during the pandemic but also provides deeper insights into how visual strategies align with the broader context. By shedding light on these nuances, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of visual political communication online.

In the past decade, social media provided politicians with new possibilities for engaging with their constituents. These platforms allowed political leaders to communicate their messages through widely used channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, while also allowing them to optimize their

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communication campaigns at a fraction of the costs compared to traditional methods (Bennett et al., 2020; Schill, 2012). Simultaneously, there has been a resurgence of interest in the visual aspects of politicians' communication strategies (D. G. Lilleker et al., 2019; Schill, 2012). While the significance of images in politics has long been a subject of study in political communication (Rosenberg et al., 1986), the proliferation of social media platforms, where the role of images is crucial (Bucy & Joo, 2021; D. G. Lilleker et al., 2019), has further heightened academic interest in this area.

The study of visual communication gained significant momentum with the rise of Instagram as a prominent social media platform for political engagement (Larsson, 2021). The surge in popularity of political Instagram is evident from the fact that the number of followers of EU politicians' Instagram profiles more than tripled between 2019 and 2021, as shown in the online supplementary materials. The advent of Instagram has accelerated the process of personalization and emotionalization (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010) of politicians' communication. Especially on Instagram, we have evidence that the communication style focuses on the figure of the party leader (Filimonov et al., 2016; D. G. Lilleker et al., 2019), usually surrounded by a crowd of their supporters (Schill, 2012), and often engaged in pleasant activities (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Filimonov et al., 2016; D. G. Lilleker et al., 2019). So far, studies on the topic mainly focused on establishing the facts (Merton, 1993), by descriptively assessing how politicians tend to portray themselves (see the pioneering works of Farkas & Bene, 2021; Haim & Jungblut, 2021; Peng, 2021) and by producing taxonomies of these strategies. The determinants driving politicians' communication strategies and how these relate to the socio-political environment in which they are embedded have been largely overlooked. In this work, we will ask two main questions: Do politicians' visual strategies follow particular patterns, choosing specific visual features instead of others? and, What are the environmental determinants of these choices?

To answer those questions, we introduce the concept of visual opportunity structure (VOS). We borrow the concept from the discursive opportunity structure (DOS) theoretical argument, developed in the social movement communication literature (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004; Koopmans & Statham, 1999; McCammon, 2013) and more recently adapted to top-down forms of political communication (De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021; Ernst et al., 2019; Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). According to the DOS framework, political actors employ specific discursive tools after evaluating the appropriateness of these within their social, political, or media environment. Our approach focuses on how specific visual features can be seen as legitimate and appropriate, according to the environment in which political actors are embedded and their position in the political landscape. We argue that, given the increasing importance of the visual component in political

communication, political actors will be more careful in selecting visual features that they evaluate as appropriate. The COVID-19 pandemic offered us an ideal opportunity to test our theoretical framework. The pandemic represented an unprecedented exogenous shock in Europe that rapidly impacted how politicians and institutions communicated their policies and activities (Castro Seixas, 2021; D. Lilleker et al., 2021). We contend that visual communication strategies have also been affected by the new socio-political landscape shaped by the crisis. We will focus on two features that are expected to change dramatically in the face of the pandemic: the presence of positive emotionalization, and the depiction of groups of people in the leaders' visual communication (see Jost, 2022). Under normal circumstances, these two features are widely used by European leaders in their communication: smiles are used to portray a pleasant, confident image of the leader (Masch et al., 2021), while the representation of groups of people and crowds is employed to portray the leader as a man/woman of the people, surrounded by a group of supporters (Schill, 2012). The pandemic, however, rapidly overturned the semantic context of the political arena. A smiling leader might be perceived as inappropriate when hundreds of people are dying every day because of a lethal virus. Similarly, the depiction of groups or crowds became unsuitable—and even suggestive of illegal activities—given the short-range aerosol spread dynamic of the coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, represents an opportunity to uncover politicians' visual strategies of communication and how they adapt to a new, uncertain environment. We argue that this sudden change led politicians to drastically restructure their communication, evaluating the structure of opportunities and constraints engendered by the pandemic, and reducing the employment of those visual features. Additionally, we produce testable hypotheses concerning the position in the political landscape of a leader. Consistent with existing literature, we argue that government leaders, given their heightened institutional responsibility, will be considerably more cautious in communicating visual features that may be perceived as inappropriate by the audience.

To test our framework, we collected a dataset of all the Instagram posts that the major political European leaders—including 27 leaders in the European Union and one in the United Kingdom—published between March 1, 2019, and December 31, 2021 ($N = 73,379$). The data starts one year preceding the crisis and covers at least the first three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the images posted by European politicians have been subjected to an automatic analysis performed with the Microsoft Computer Vision API and Face API (see Peng, 2021), aimed at identifying the two features that are more likely to change in the wake of the pandemic: a positive message expressed by the image (the presence of smiling faces) and what we call the *group archetype* (the presence of groups of people). We show results confirming the VOS argument:

the two features occur less during the pandemic period compared with the pre-pandemic one and the decrease in the employment of these communication features is more pronounced during the hardest phases of the pandemic. Additionally, government leaders displayed a more substantial reduction in positive emotionalization compared to opposition leaders.

Visual political communication and the pandemic crisis: Conceptualizing the visual opportunity structure

Starting from the pioneering work of Rosenberg et al. (1986) that showed that a candidate's pictures can produce a representation of their personality, their fitness for a public office on the citizens, and, ultimately, can affect their likelihood of being voted (see also Grabe & Bucy, 2009; D. G. Lilleker et al., 2019), the significance of the visual element in political communication has been extensively explored by the literature.

In this study, we specifically focus on two visual features that are highly relevant to our objectives: positive emotionalization and what we refer to as the group archetype. Pundits and academics have long identified the central role of emotions in political communication (see Brader, 2020; Valentino et al., 2011). Emotional appeals can also be conceptualized in visual terms. Previous literature (Bast, 2021; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020) shows, for instance, that political leaders' emotionalization of visual communication tends to be positive, particularly when we consider the most important non-verbal cue of positive emotionalization: smiling. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that smiling leaders tend to be more favorably received by audiences compared to those displaying a serious demeanor (Horiuchi et al., 2012; Masch et al., 2021; Peng, 2021).

The second visual tool of interest is what we call the group archetype, also known as the crowd archetype (Schill, 2012), a much-employed representation that sees leaders surrounded by a crowd of supporters (Glassman & Kenney, 1994; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Schill, 2012). According to Dobkiewicz (2019), the depiction of crowds and groups of people signals an attempt to decrease the distance between the leaders and their followers—particularly during election campaigns (Haim & Jungblut, 2021)—so that leaders are more likely to be perceived as men/women of the people.

The COVID-19 crisis brought a swift transformation in the semantic context surrounding various actions in which politicians were typically depicted in their visual communications. Images capturing smiles, hugs, crowds, and groups, which were once considered commonplace before the pandemic, suddenly were deemed inappropriate, hazardous, or even illegal. Considering this dramatic event, our Visual Opportunity Structure (VOS) theoretical framework aims to provide a set of testable hypotheses to account for its consequences.

The VOS argument

We derive the VOS argument from the political-sociological literature, and, particularly, from the political and discursive opportunity structure theories (POS and DOS; Koopmans & Olzak, 2004; Koopmans & Statham, 1999; Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 1994). These theoretical frameworks, predominantly employed in the study of social movements' communication strategies, suggest that the ability to mobilize citizens around a particular issue is influenced by the constraints and opportunities inherent in the political, institutional, and media systems. The success of collective actors' claims is contingent upon how these claims are perceived as sensible, realistic, and legitimate within the broader political environment (McCammon, 2013): when a specific discourse is broadly considered legitimate collective actors are encouraged to follow those communication paths (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Several factors contribute to the actors' perceptions regarding the viability of a particular communication strategy. Sometimes changes in society's general cultural schemas can render a specific strategy successful, while, in other cases, the viability of various communication options is directly influenced by gatekeepers of political information flow, such as journalists and the media.

Although the POS/DOS arguments have been mainly employed to explain the actions and communication strategies of social movements, several attempts to apply this theoretical framework to top-down political communication strategies have been made (see De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021; Ernst et al., 2019; Olivas Osuna & Rama, 2021; Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). Politicians' and social movements' communication is, after all, bounded by similar political and discursive opportunity structures. This means that politicians must deal with the legitimacy and, more in general, the appropriateness of their claims, just like less powerful and influential political actors (Koopmans & Muis, 2009). Following this line of research, De Bruycker and Rooduijn (2021) observe that both populist and non-populist parties are more prone to express populist claims when issues involving European integration have been made salient by the media or civil society groups. Olivas Osuna and Rama (2021) claim that the COVID-19 crisis in Spain offered the radical right-wing party VOX the opportunity to shift from a traditionally conservative discourse to an aggressive populist one by adopting "a highly antagonistic and moral rhetoric to attempt to discredit the Government, gain visibility, and harvest political support from dissatisfied citizens" (Olivas Osuna & Rama, 2021, p. 14).

How can this theoretical structure be translated into visual terms? In first approximation, we might state that the VOS approach argues that the visual strategies of political actors are conditioned by what is considered

socially and politically appropriate by a specific audience at a given moment. The VOS is an intrinsically dynamic argument, suggesting that changes in the environment lead to changes in visual strategies. Notice that the VOS argument is not conceptualized as the opportunity to visualize—rather than speak or write—a message, which is influenced by the architectures and affordances of a specific medium (see Bossetta, 2018). Rather, it concerns the consequences that changes in the environment have specifically on the visual component of an actor's communication.

In existing literature, the visual, written, and spoken elements might all be intended as part of the broader concept of “political discourse” (Lou, 2017). How leaders portray themselves, their facial expressions, and, in general, many of the elements that contribute to producing the visual framework of a leader's communication can be defined as full-fledged discursive strategies. If visual elements were truly indistinguishable from other discursive elements, the DOS would be sufficient in explaining visual strategies, and there would be no need for an additional argument to account for dynamics in visual communication choices. However, we argue that visual elements in political communication possess distinctive characteristics that necessitate an independent conceptualization.

The reason for our distinction lies in two characteristics that distinguish visual features from strictly discursive ones. First, visual political communication is usually not exclusively political (Bast, 2021). POS/DOS frameworks mainly consider the political aspects of actors' communication (Koopmans & Statham, 1999). However, visual political communication encompasses more subtle cues that do not necessarily convey a clear political meaning (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020). This theoretical distinction leads to a significant shift in empirical terms. To understand the patterns of change and stability in visual strategies, we cannot focus solely on the strictly political visual elements that actors communicate; rather, we must consider other elements—such as smiles or the presence of a crowd—that do not provide a straightforward political meaning (Bast, 2021).

Second, compared with spoken/written words, pictures are not path dependent. Previous literature (e.g. Downs, 1957; Lynch & Madonna, 2013; Petrocik et al., 2003) argues that political actors maintain some form of coherence in their (nonvisual) communication and even in employing consistent rhetoric over time. This means that political actors tend to present their discourse and maintain their argument in a coherent fashion over a certain period. Consequently, abrupt and substantial changes in the consistency of spoken or written words are rare occurrences, as inconsistencies may lead the audience to perceive political actors as less credible (see Downs, 1957). Visual communication does not follow such a pattern: Political actors, indeed, tend to switch easily from images that tackle serious

political issues to scenes in which they are portrayed in a private or informal setting (Haim & Jungblut, 2021).

Visual communication, thus, presents differences from strictly discursive features and entails its own set of guidelines that inform leaders on whether specific features should be employed, being appropriate, or avoided, being inappropriate. As for the latter case, we can imagine several naive examples of the inappropriateness of visual features that politicians try to avoid, such as portraying themselves as excessively rational or cold during a dramatic event, or, conversely, too emotionally intense in a situation that does not require it (see Bucy, 2000). Additionally, showing pictures of convivial dinners right after a dramatic event or the representation of pleasant activities during a difficult time of the leader's party can be seen as additional examples of inappropriateness. In recent years, we witnessed several episodes where politicians suffered hard media backlash for presenting inappropriate visual cues. For example, Italian Democratic Party secretary Nicola Zingaretti received criticism after he posted a picture of himself drinking with friends in Milan during the first days of the pandemic in Lombardy (Horowitz et al., 2020; Repubblica, 2020).¹ Aside from COVID-19-related situations, in August 2019 Donald Trump faced media backlash after being pictured smiling in his golf club just hours after a mass shooting (Perrone, 2019). Those examples demonstrate how inconsistencies between the leader's portrayed emotional state and the opportunity structure have negative consequences for politicians. Moreover, after a shooting at a Nashville school in March 2023, some news organizations called out a Republican representative for not removing an old picture showing his infant son embracing a gun (Gaudiano, 2023). The picture had been on Instagram since 2016, but the fact that it was not removed became relevant after the school shooting and the subsequent change in the visual opportunity structure. As a final example, George W. Bush called a photograph of him surveying the devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 a "huge mistake" as the image made the president look "detached and uncaring" in the face of tragedy (Wing, 2011) (Figure 1).

At the supply-side level, politicians avoid these messages to ward off any visual cue that can displease part of their constituencies or be exploited by opponents as potential material for political attacks.

The first aim of this project is to investigate the role that inappropriateness might have on the employment of visual features in politicians' communication strategies. Arguing this rationality criterion reveals a crucial element that we inherit from previous frameworks, namely, the fact that politicians exhibit a degree of intentionality and strategic thinking in modifying their visual

¹He was not engaging in any illegal activity since social distancing measures were not still employed by the Italian government at the time.



Figure 1. Examples of images that the public criticized politicians for posting.

Left: Nicola Zingaretti drinking with friends in Milan, on Feb 27, 2020 (Repubblica, 2020).

Center: the picture in a Tennessee representative's Instagram feed (Gaudiano, 2023).

Right: George W. Bush surveying damage caused by Hurricane Katrina (Wing, 2011).

communication strategies. Therefore, such changes in visual representations are not merely reactionary or incidental. Instead they are to some extent deliberately organized to enhance the effectiveness of online communication strategies. We posit that these modifications in visual tactics are undertaken with specific goals in mind—primarily to optimize the impact and reception of their messaging within the digital public sphere. Therefore, politicians are not passive actors merely responding to external stimuli; rather, they are active agents, consciously adapting their visual narratives to align with the perceived expectations and sentiments of their audience.

Partially related to this element, we might argue that the position of actors in the political landscape engenders relevant differences in politicians' visual strategies. Previous literature (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016) stressed that incumbents do not have the same bouquet of communication strategies compared with their opposition counterparts. Incumbents' heightened institutional responsibilities require more careful management along with their enhanced visibility, which subjects them to greater scrutiny by public opinion than opposition leaders. Translating this argument in VOS terms, the inappropriateness of communication strategies employed by government leaders carries potentially greater costs compared with those of opposition leaders. The literature, so far, focused solely on the discursive aspect of the government-opposition asymmetries in communication strategies, taking little account of the possible differential attention that majority/minority leaders and politicians receive when employing specific visual features. We will test this additional element of our argument, observing whether a government/opposition asymmetry is present in leaders' communication when it comes to the inappropriateness with respect to the socio-political environment.

Case study and hypotheses

As argued above, the changes engendered by the pandemic led to a rapid change in the social norms usually shared in society. Activities previously considered usual—such as going outside, socializing with friends over a drink, or dancing without social distancing—became highly problematic within a matter of weeks following the new coronavirus outbreak in February and March 2020. People quickly internalized these changes, accepting narratives that aimed at increasing compliance with the new social norms (Jiang et al., 2022; Mohamad, 2020). According to the VOS argument, this societal transformation prompted a readjustment in politicians' communication strategies, where visual features that were previously considered normal and desirable suddenly became improper or even signaled illegal activities, particularly after the implementation of lockdown measures. According to the VOS argument, the visual communication of political actors operates within a cost-opportunity structure. From previous literature on visual political communication, we know that, in normal times, displaying positive emotionalization and/or crowds represents an opportunity to portray the image of a strong, self-confident, and pleasant leader. The pandemic suddenly overturned this situation, shrinking this window of opportunity and making the employment of such features a cost.

As a result of our argument, we expect that the manifestation of positive emotionalization by political leaders, such as smiling, would produce a strong dissonance when hundreds of people are dying every day because of the coronavirus and millions are subjected to lockdown measures. As a result, such a visual choice, which would be straightforward in normal times, might drive criticism from leaders' constituencies and political opponents. Given the possibility for leaders to easily change their visual political communication by just avoiding pictures that depict positive emotionalization, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: The likelihood of portraying positive emotionalization in politicians' images decreases during the pandemic period compared to the pre-pandemic period.

It became evident from the early stages of the pandemic that the virus primarily spread through short-range aerosol transmission. In response, institutions promptly implemented measures to limit people's participation in crowded events, and in many cases, imposed lockdowns. This dramatic change in the everyday life of Europeans is a textbook case of the reduction in the opportunity to depict a crucial visual element, what we call the group archetype. Consistent with our theoretical framework, we argue that while the group archetype presents an opportunity for positively portraying a leader in normal times, during the pandemic, it becomes a cost.

Politicians displaying crowds in their visual communication could be seen as disregarding the importance of adhering to social distancing measures. As a result, we hypothesize that:

H2: The likelihood of portraying groups and crowds in politicians' images decreases during the pandemic period compared to the pre-pandemic period.

The expansion and reduction of the opportunities to portray specific visual elements can be further tested if we consider the COVID-19 pandemic not as a single event, but rather as a dynamic process that has been depicted in waves. Previous research demonstrated that COVID-19 infections and deaths displayed a degree of seasonality, with the virus having a greater impact during the cold seasons (Liu et al., 2021). After a relatively short first wave, the number of infections and deaths lowered during the summer of 2020 and then rose again with a long wave in the fall (or two, see Cacciapaglia et al., 2020). A similar trend can be observed in late 2021, with a low death rate during the summer followed by an increase in infections and deaths during the autumn and winter.

We can expect that political actors will structure their visual communication consistently with the expansion and reduction of the dangers caused by COVID-19, by drastically reducing the employment of problematic visual elements—crowds and smiles—when the opportunity window shrinks and when the pandemic hits harder. Alternatively, we can expect politicians to increase their employment when the opportunity window widens and when the pandemic momentarily loses its strength. The third and fourth hypotheses thus read as follows:

H3: The likelihood of portraying positive emotionalization in politicians' images decreases during periods when the pandemic hits more severely compared to the inter-wave periods.

H4: The likelihood of portraying groups and crowds in politicians' images decreases during periods when the pandemic hits more severely compared to the inter-wave periods.

As stressed above, a relevant moderator of the top-down communication choices is the government and opposition status of politicians. Government officials tend to be more careful in choosing their communication strategies, given their institutional stance and their visibility, as some evidence on populist communication suggests (Swanson & Gherghina, 2023; Thomeczek, 2023). If the VOS argument holds, and especially if some form of intentionality and strategic reasoning is present behind politicians' choices, we can argue that leaders belonging to government parties will be more motivated to avoid publishing inappropriate content. Particularly during peak periods of the pandemic waves, actors belonging to parties represented in government, who we label as government politicians, will be

prompter and more decisive in avoiding problematic visual elements in their communication compared with politicians belonging to parties that are not part of the government coalition when they publish an image online, labeled as opposition leaders. H5 and H6, respectively, focus on positive emotionalization and group archetype:

H5: The effects hypothesized in H1 and H3 will be stronger for government politicians compared with opposition leaders.

H6: The effects hypothesized in H2 and H4 will be stronger for government politicians with respect to opposition leaders.

Data and methods

We test our hypotheses using an originally collected dataset including all posts published by 157 political leaders from the 27 European Union countries and the United Kingdom, from March 1, 2019, to December 31, 2021, and employing automatic image and emotional recognition algorithms to detect the theoretically relevant features.²

The data collection is composed of two steps. First, all posts on the Instagram profiles of the leaders have been downloaded via the CrowdTangle platform API ($N = 73,379$).³ Second, we applied image recognition algorithms to the collected images, which allowed the detection of positive emotionalization and the presence of the group archetype.

Image recognition algorithms represent a subset of machine learning algorithms that produce, in an automated and replicable way, information on the images that the researcher subjects to them (for more information about the algorithms employed, see Joo & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018; Joo et al., 2014). In particular, the algorithm used can analyze images in two ways that are useful to our aims. First, it traces all the smiling human faces in a picture. Second, it provides up to 10 *tags*, namely words describing the content of the image. For instance, *cat* will be among the tags of an image where a cat is present, while *crowd* will be included when many people are portrayed (Boussalis et al., 2021; Joo & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018; Masch et al., 2021; Peng, 2018).

²The politicians selected are the party leaders of all the parties that elected at least one MP in the EU parliament and received more than 4% of the national vote in the 2019 elections. If a party experienced leadership changes, all those who led the party within the timeframe considered were included. See the online supplementary materials for a full list.

³Only posts containing images published in the feed were selected, thus excluding videos, Igtvs, Instagram stories, or reels. For the Instagram image gallery, known as “carousels,” only the cover image was included.

Dependent variables

The two variables that we use as outcomes in our models are derived from the automatic visual recognition algorithms.

The first variable measures positive emotionalization by recognizing smiling faces in the image.⁴ The algorithm produces a scale from 0 to 1 representing the percentage confidence, expressed in decimal form, that the image contains a smiling face. As for this variable, we produced two sets of models. In the first, we recode the original variable as 1 when it scores over .5 and as 0 otherwise. In the second, shown in the online supplementary materials, we use the original measure provided by the algorithm, treating it as a continuous variable. The two sets of models do not present substantially different results.

The second dependent variable, tackling the group archetype, is based on the automatic tagging system outlined above. To identify the visual feature, we isolated the two tags that unequivocally indicate the presence of several people in an image: group and crowd.⁵ In this case, we are persuaded that this represents a valid measure of what we are dealing with. If our argument holds, the likelihood of showing people who are near each other will drastically reduce during the pandemic period.⁶

Independent variables

The main independent variable of our models testing H1 and H2 is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the post has been published before or after the pandemic. We marked the beginning of the pandemic as the discovery of the first case in Europe on February 20, 2020. In models testing H3 and H4, we instead used a set of dummy variables indicating the month in which the post was published.

We also included a dichotomous variable indicating whether the leader is part of a government party. Therefore, this variable is set to 1 for all the posts published by a leader that, on the day the post was published, belongs

⁴It could be argued that smiles are not the sole element that can operationalize positive emotionalization. The Microsoft Vision algorithm, indeed, can gather a set of additional emotions. However, those other emotions seem not to be present in our data. A detailed analysis of other emotions and the possible theoretical implications related to automatic emotional coding can be found in the online supplementary materials.

⁵A qualitative inspection of the images shows that pictures with two or more people who are near each other are tagged by the algorithm as a group or crowd.

⁶We have qualitatively investigated the tagging accuracy isolating the “group archetype” and the positive emotionalization by coding manually a subset of posts of our dataset. Additionally, we compared the Microsoft vision algorithm with another state-of-the-art algorithm for facial recognition, Face++. Results confirm the validity of our measures and are available in online supplementary materials.

to a party that is part of the government coalition and 0 otherwise. Further, we linked variables that trace the daily situation of the pandemic in every national context, as well as in the European Union, in terms of deaths by COVID-19 as detected by the official health authorities.

Control variables

In our dataset, we linked every leader's account on Instagram with party-level information obtained through the ParlGov dataset (Döring & Manow, 2016).

All the models include a variable measuring the left-right placement of the leader's party, a variable measuring the strength of the same party in the most recent national election, a weekend dummy (0 for working days, 1 otherwise), and a country fixed effect. See the online supplementary materials for descriptive statistics regarding those variables.

Models

We test our hypotheses by fitting eight logistic multilevel models, with posts nested into leaders' accounts. The first two models present, as dependent variables, the two dichotomous variables representing positive emotionalization and the group archetype, and have, as the main independent variable, the dummy indicating whether the post was published before or after the pandemic. Two other models use the month dummies instead. In that way, it is possible to investigate the over-time trends of the prevalence of specific visual elements, according to the succession of pandemic waves.⁷

To test H5 and H6, the four above-mentioned models are fitted with an interaction between the relevant independent variables, indicating the pre-pandemic or pandemic period or the month of the publication of the post, and the government or opposition leader dummy variable.

Results

Figure 2 tests our first two hypotheses.⁸

⁷To further strengthen the methodological aspects of the paper, we have also added alternative models based on spline regressions (as in Hmielowski et al., 2020). Results, presented in the online supplementary materials produce substantially the same results that are presented in the paper by also adding systematic significance tests the comfort us on the general interpretation of the results.

⁸See the online supplementary materials for the full regression tables of the models presented in section 3. The online supplementary materials additionally contain a discussion of results related to control variables.

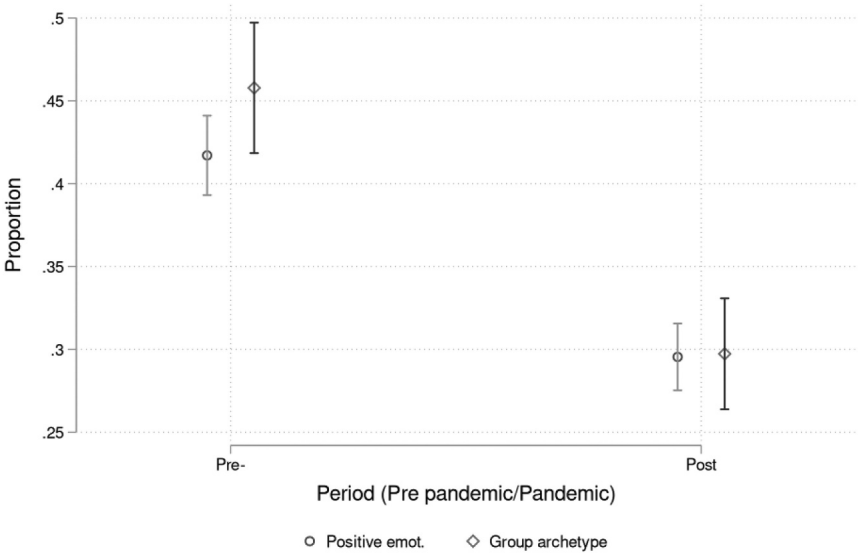


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization and group archetype (pre-pandemic/pandemic).

As for the predicted probability that an image portrays positive emotionalization, we see a drop in the employment of the feature of more than 12 points from 41.7% of positive emotionalization recorded in the pre-pandemic period to 29.5% in the pandemic period. The predicted presence of crowds and groups of people in the images presents an even larger gap, with a drop of 15% points from 46% in the pre-pandemic period to less than 31% in the pandemic one. This evidence is consistent with the VOS argument: When the costs of publishing specific visual elements rise, political leaders drastically lower the likelihood of presenting those features in their communication.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show predicted probabilities for the level of employment of the two visual features (the solid line) and the number of deaths in Europe per million inhabitants (the over-impressed bar graph). This representation allows for simultaneous visualization of the fluctuations in the opportunity window (i.e., the pandemic waves) and the corresponding responses of political leaders. It is thus possible to observe the relationship between the changing context and the communication strategies adopted by political leaders.

The two figures clearly show that patterns of employment of the visual features follow the VOS argument. Positive emotionalization and group archetype were consistently employed in the year before the pandemic, followed by a contraction during each pandemic wave and an expansion during periods

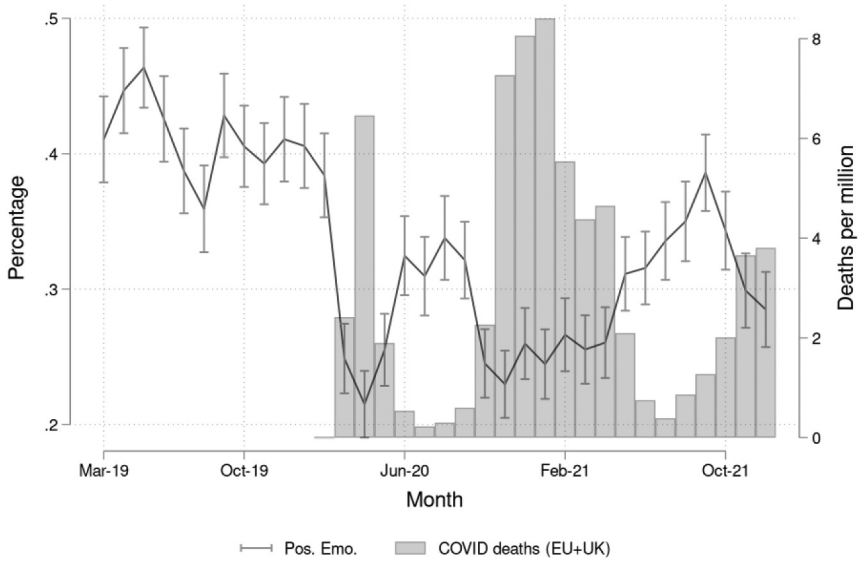


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization (monthly).

when the pandemic impact was relatively lower, particularly observed during the summer. Overall, we might say that the empirical evidence sustains H3 and H4.⁹

Figures 5, 6, and 7 show models with interactions to test H5 and H6. Figure 5 shows the drop in predicted probabilities of the two visual features by government/opposition status of the politician. From the left panel, we can see that, as expected, the drop in the employment of positive emotionalization during the pandemic is more pronounced among leaders in government. On the other hand, however, there is no significant difference between government and opposition leaders when it comes to the group archetype.

The pattern is further confirmed by Figures 6 and 7, which provide the equivalent of the predicted probabilities in Figures 3 and 4 with the fitted interaction between the month in which the posts were published and government or opposition status. Figure 6 shows that during periods of severe pandemic impact, all politicians tend to refrain from employing

⁹It could be argued that focusing on the pandemic trends across Europe instead of the individual national trends might be misleading, especially because the pandemic waves were not completely aligned in all the countries considered (Cacciapaglia et al., 2020). An additional piece of empirical evidence that tests H3-H6 more systematically exploits the comparative nature of the dataset. The online supplementary materials show predicted probabilities for the last set of multilevel models, which include a 14-day moving average of the COVID-19 death rate in each leader's national context. The results are substantially equal to those shown here.

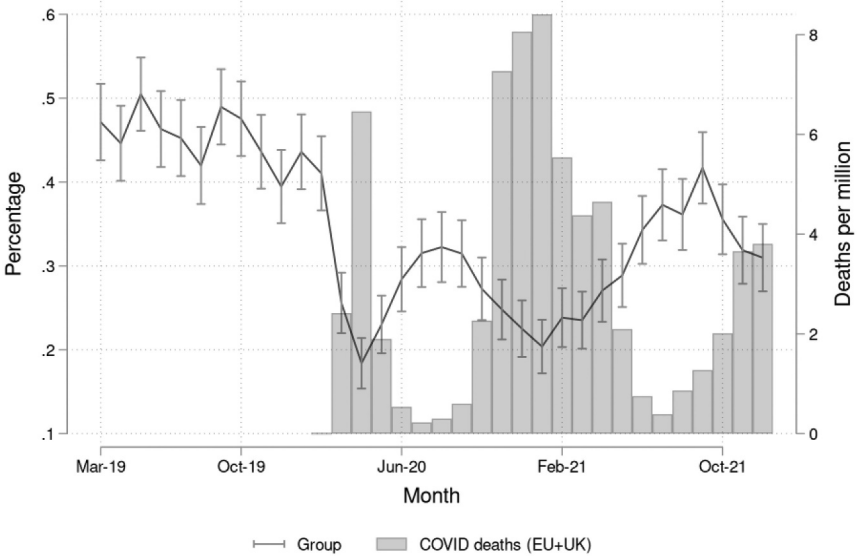


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of presenting group archetype (monthly).

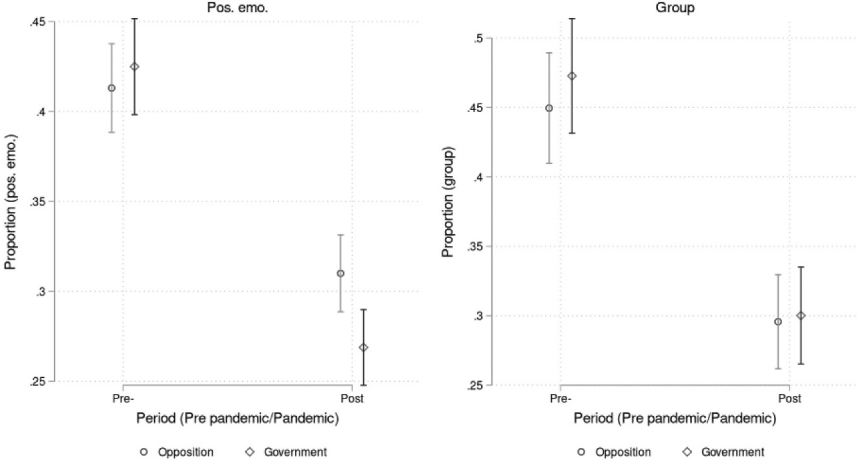


Figure 5. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization (left panel) and group archetype (right panel) by government and opposition (pre-pandemic /pandemic).

positive emotionalization in their visual communication. However, government leaders exhibit a more pronounced avoidance of this feature, displaying significantly lower rates of employment in both the first and second waves: in specific months, the government and opposition gap in positive emotionalization avoidance reaches 10% points. In line with the findings

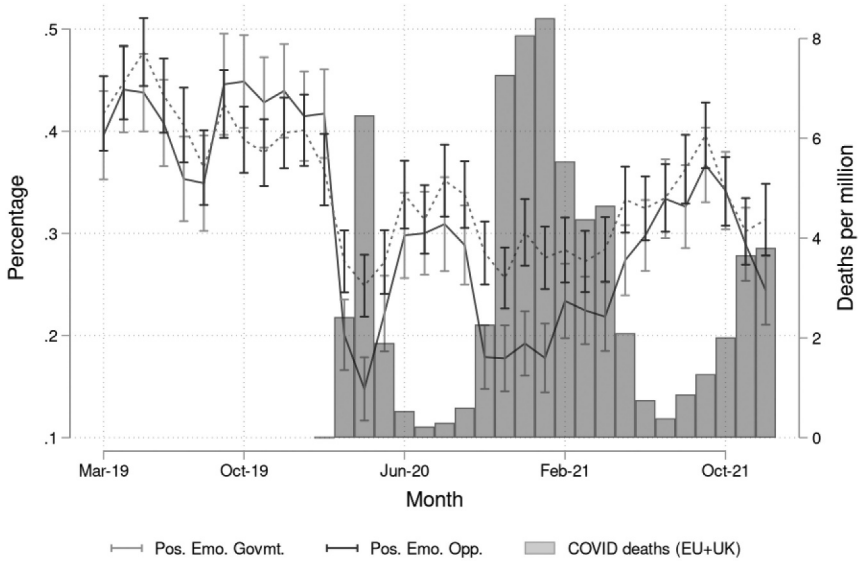


Figure 6. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization by government and opposition (monthly).

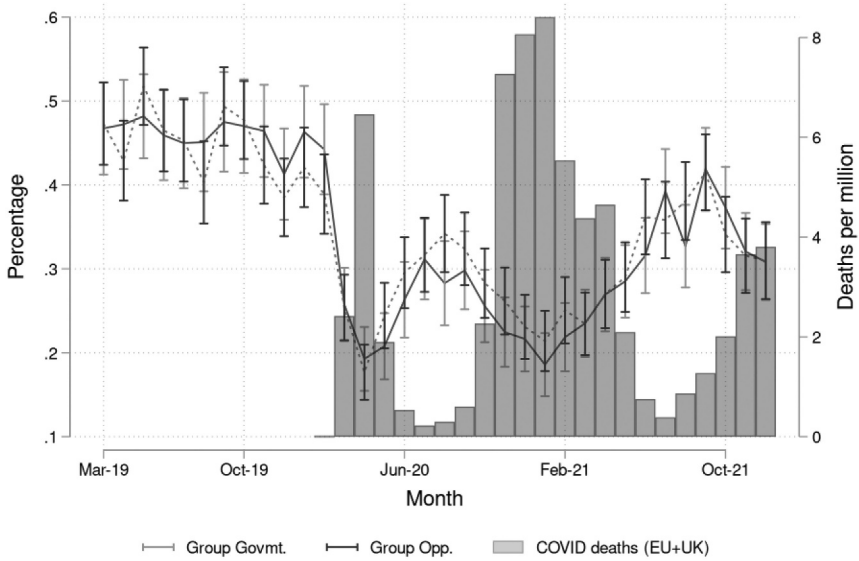


Figure 7. Predicted probabilities of presenting group archetype by government and opposition (monthly).

presented in Figures 5 and 7 shows that there is no significant difference between government and opposition leaders regarding the employment of the group archetype feature. In sum, while H5 is supported by the data, H6 is not.

Conclusions

Our results point out, quite unsurprisingly, that the visual strategies of political leaders have been influenced by the pandemic. The interesting fact here is how they have been influenced. Specifically, we showed that consistently with our VOS argument, politicians across Europe seem to have adapted their visual communication strategies to align with a dramatically changed situation. Notably, the difference between the pre-pandemic and pandemic employment of inappropriate visual features is quite strong, with ranges of 12 to 15 points in predicted probability difference in the employment of positive emotionalization and group archetype. These results are consistent with the intuition that leaders are careful about the visual representation of their communication and, especially, they estimate which type of visual communication is likely to be rewarding among their audience.

In this respect, the wave-like trend of the pandemic represents a unique opportunity to test whether the expansion or reduction of the structure of opportunities to communicate specific visual features leads to a significant change in the strategies employed by the leaders. The employment of the positive emotionalization and group archetype mirrors the trends of the pandemic waves: During periods of heightened pandemic impact, characterized by an increased number of reported COVID-19 deaths, the opportunity structure for portraying smiles and groups significantly diminished across the three waves, from March 2020 to December 2021. Conversely, the employment of these same features increased in the moments in which the pandemic softens, mainly during summer. Also, if we look at the pre-pandemic period, we see that those features were roughly stable during the whole year before the COVID-19 outbreak, which reassures us that the trend is not due to a seasonality effect.

Our analysis also attempts to provide some evidence of the intentional nature of the visual strategies organized by politicians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we do not provide direct evidence of the mechanisms, we might argue that, if some elements of strategic reasoning are employed in the visual choices that politicians make, leaders of parties in government would be more careful than the opposition in portraying positive emotionalization during the pandemic, especially during its most dramatic period. If this did not happen, an

alternative explanation would have been that, when COVID-19 cases increased, politicians avoided big gatherings and did not portray clear signs of positive emotionalization, which limited their communication to different information. In the results, we show that the difference between government and opposition held when for positive emotionalization but did not apply to the group archetype, which sees all leaders drop their employment of the feature similarly. This outcome might be attributed to the distinct connotations associated with the two features; positive emotionalization is connected to inappropriateness during a pandemic, as it is deemed inappropriate to portray oneself smiling during a pandemic wave, while the use of the group archetype, in specific moments and countries, may even imply illegal activities, such as unauthorized gatherings. The crowd archetype might thus be seen as a feature containing an additional cost if published. The result is also consistent with the stronger negative effects on the probability of the employment of group features in pictures, compared to positive emotionalization, when the pandemic broke out.¹⁰

Discussion

This project's main aims have been to theoretically posit some basic concepts that might explain politicians' choices in their visual representation online. We relied on a well-established strand of literature dealing with the relationship between the cultural, political, and social environment along with the choices that political actors make to communicate to their constituencies and to society in general: the Political and Discursive Opportunity Structure (POS/DOS) arguments (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Those theories posit that specific political arguments made by specific political actors are bounded by the opportunity structure that is dominant in a specific society. Political actors, in other words, try to fit into these boundaries, under penalty of making their message less appealing, or even counterproductive.

The VOS argument stretches previous POS and DOS views, positing that we can analytically define a separate level of communication that is becoming increasingly important for politicians: the visual one. Our stance starts from the belief that visual choices are crucial in the communication process of party leaders and that politicians are careful in selecting specific visual

¹⁰Regarding the intentionality issue, we have produced additional analyses that see as a dependent variable the portrayal of surgical masks. The strategic nature of VOS is additionally demonstrated showing that right-wing politicians' strategies are significantly less inclined to show surgical masks in their images, consistent with the literature. Details are available in online supplementary materials.

elements that their audience deems appropriate. Specifically, the combination of the VOS argument and the empirical evidence brought in this paper suggests three main interesting conclusions. First, consistently with the VOS argument, we notice that visual communication adjustments can be very quick as the societal and cultural opportunity structures change. In this specific case, politicians and their communication staff have been able to omit specific visual features in real-time, according to the expected modifications in the structure of opportunities. Second, there are specific visual features that are seen by politicians as crucial: Our results suggest that the need to be perceived as pleasant and surrounded by the people is so important for political leaders that the features are re-introduced, at almost pre-pandemic levels, as soon as the leaders evaluate that the structure of opportunities allows it, even in a situation that it is not completely safe (e.g., the summer of 2020 and 2021). This confirms what is argued by Schill (2012), namely, that a hierarchy of importance of visual features exists and that some visual features are seen by political leaders and communicators as non-negotiable. Third, we show that the positions in the political arena for both government and opposition are relevant in shaping the communication strategies of politicians, with government leaders more influenced by the opportunity structure than opposition ones.

The paper presents several limitations that should be considered in future research. The main theoretical issue is that the VOS argument has been applied to the case in which the sudden change of the opportunity structure was evident. Within a few weeks of the beginning of the pandemic, it became limpid that the emergency would have led to a dramatic change in the European social and political landscape. This change had, not surprisingly, strong consequences on leaders' political communication, both at the discursive level and, as we have shown, at the visual one. The pandemic thus represents a notable case in which VOS-based strategies can be easily unveiled. However, what happens in situations in which the change in the opportunity structure is less clear or drastic? Our case study can only account for a rather small subset of all the changes that might occur at the opportunity structure level and is not able to produce testable predictions for less dramatic situations.

An additional theoretical limitation of the paper is that it lacks a compelling mechanism that underlies the choice of politicians to employ the VOS-consistent reasoning: Is the change of visual features performed autonomously by politicians and their staff or, rather, there is a push by an external actor including the politicians' audience to change visually their communication? To date, we cannot provide a clear answer to this question, especially given the limitation of the Instagram API which does not allow scraping the most evident features of the audience's reactions to political communication online and comments (see

Mancosu & Vegetti, 2020).¹¹ We believe further research should employ expert surveys or qualitative interviews of political actors and their communication staff to explore the awareness regarding the opportunity structures in which their visual communication is embedded, where this awareness comes from, and the intentionality regarding their visual communication choices in specific contexts.

From the empirical point of view, we must also acknowledge that the data we collected are rather under-used in the paper: they do not exploit completely the comparative nature of European visual political communication, by, for instance, investigating whether national socio-political variables can alter the effects presented in the paper. This represents an obvious choice, given the focus that we applied to present the VOS argument at the expense of more refined empirical evidence. Moreover, we need to stress that the algorithms employed do not allow us to reliably recognize whether the people depicted in the images analyzed are indeed politicians or other subjects, such as ordinary people.

Finally, we do not investigate explicitly the relationship between the VOS and the DOS theories. In other words, we do not analyze the text information that is usually available, together with pictures, in Instagram posts. Future research should focus on investigating this latter aspect.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data and syntax files necessary to replicate the results of the study are publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L5WUU8>.

Open scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L5WUU8> and <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L5WUU8>.

¹¹An attempt to partially answer this crucial theoretical question is presented in online supplementary materials.

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